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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of social responsibility in American public relations, observes its influence on organized communication, and suggests ways in which the role of the public relations practitioner may contribute to the development of a better society. Interviews conducted with 22 members of the Texas Public Relations Association reflected four major areas of concern: the level of respect that public relations receives from management, the degree of supervision of the public relations function, the role played by public relations in decision making, and the level of professional status awarded public relations. A theory of social responsibility in public relations, based on the evidence gathered from these interviews, generally states that the level of social responsibility in public relations rises as professionalization takes place and as the level of respect from management increases, as the degree of supervision from management decreases, and as the public relations counselor's role in decision-making processes becomes more dominant. (KS)

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A MULTI-STEP THEORY APPROACH TOWARD SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Social responsibility is a concept American society holds in high esteem today. Proponents of this doctrine place many moral and ethical restrictions upon institutions and organizations, and also insist that it is absolutely necessary that all Americans always act and perform their duties in a socially responsible manner.

This obligation, which implies honesty, truth, accuracy, fair dealing and concern for the public's welfare, has been placed on communications in general and specifically on the communicators themselves. The mass media first became aware of their need to be fully responsible to the public after the Hutchins Commission published its 1947 report on freedom of the press.[1] Since then, critics of communication have attacked economic controls of the mass media, in the case of the United States; and, political controls of information flow, in the cases of many other nations; always insisting that the first and foremost concern of communication was responsibility to society.[2]

Public relations counselors never have been considered the most ethical, honest, moral or professional people in this country. Critics say public relations people are responsible

only to making a financial gain, but some indicate the public relations practitioners themselves are not to blame; the problem, they say, lies with the capitalistic society of which public relations is a part. And yet, public relations people are communicators. They are also, for the most part, employed with businesses and organizations which have been criticized for not being as responsible to society as they might be. It is likely that they are more aware of social responsibility today than they were a decade ago.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This article attempts to examine the role of social responsibility in American public relations, to observe its influence on organized communication, to interview public relations counselors and report their thoughts and opinions on social responsibility, and to seek out ways in which the role of the American public relations practitioner may contribute to the development of a better society.

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY?

The term, social responsibility, is viewed here as a social norm which holds that any social institution, including the smallest family unit and the largest corporation, is responsible for the behavior of its members and may be held accountable for their misdeeds.

Ideally one would hope organizations always would strive for social responsibility because they considered it the right and proper thing to do. Realistically, however, consumer awareness and other public interest concerns have forced business

and other institutions to function in a socially accountable fashion or risk the chance of having public opinion turn against them and with it the loss of revenue. Thus, in a satirical manner, a corporate executive might define social responsibility as that which has to be done to keep the masses believing the company is in business for reasons other than solely making a profit.

For operational purposes, social responsibility in this study will be considered as actions public relations counselors have carried out with the best interests of society in mind.

PR'S NEED FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Effective public relations demands social responsibility, and today the large number of public interest organizations and consumer protection groups make it all but impossible to function successfully in America without a strong concern for society. Whether one considers a private corporation or a public service, a profit-making institution or a non-profit charity, public relations essentially involves two things: business and communication.

Social institutions. Communication, and certainly the mass media which transmit this communication have become social institutions in the United States. Some have compared man's need for communication with his need for air, water and other basic necessities;[3] and communications media easily could be called the central nervous system of American society.

Effective communication has made more Americans better informed and educated than was the case a generation ago. With

this more intelligent population, Americans have moved further away from the irrational role and closer to the rational level of behavior.[4] Scholars and public relations counselors both emphasize the need for openness in communication today. As John A. Rhind, president of the National Life Assurance Company said recently, "We are entering a new era where the public right to know is going to be a major theme or movement in our society."[5]

Openness needed. And business needs openness too. Elie Abel, dean of Columbia University's journalism school told a Chicago business gathering this past February that American news media are, ". . . more responsible, accurate, and comprehensive than ever before," and, he advised business to, ". . . show a more welcoming attitude toward press inquiries, (to) try to answer questions honestly, and (to) avoid shunting the media to a public relations man down the line."[6]

One can find Professor Abel's remarks disturbing because he suggests that the public relations function is far removed from management. In theory the public relations counsel should have the same accord in an organization as the legal counsel, but such is not often so. This raises an important concern in that the role of the public relations practitioner in the decision making process differs from organization to organization. Historically, public relations has been almost a line function with plenty of supervision, and no abundance of professional respect from higher management. The importance of communication, however, has increased the need for public relations, or communication consultation, at the managerial level, with public

relations having a greater say in decision making, receiving less supervision, and, in turn, earning greater respect.

In large measure, both business and communication reflect our capitalistic society and public relations performs a vital link between these essential institutions.

PR has poor image. Public relations does not have a good image in the United States mainly because public relations activities, more often than not, have been used to trouble-shoot errors and mistakes of other facets of society. It is well known that the lack of public relations planning often leads to more defensive communication campaigns than preventive ones. Often, too, public relations is practiced by many non-accredited and unqualified practitioners. For example, Richard Nixon did not have one accredited member of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) on his public relations staff during, or before, the Watergate events of 1973-74.[7] And yet, most Americans blame poor public relations as the reason for the fall of Nixon and his administration. Many Americans who would never consider going into court with an unqualified lawyer, who would not go near an untrained physician or surgeon, would place their public relations needs in the hands of an unqualified practitioner.

This suggestion that a lawyer, or anybody else, could step in and practice public relations does plenty to diminish the suggestion that public relations is a profession with its own kind of specialized knowledge.

However, there are exceptions to these examples of public relations with little or no concern for social responsibility. In recent years many public relations counselors

have been involved in socially responsible communication campaigns such as the following: the 1974 Honeywell employee-relations project to combat alcoholism amongst company workers;[8] the City of Boston's role in reducing conflict between ethnic groups through public relations approaches;[9] the National Bank of Detroit's use of public relations to help solve the city's litter problem,[10] and the Xerox Corporation's use of public relations to help identify companies with social concerns.[11]

Aside from the public's requiring social responsibility in public relations, mention should be made of an important concept in the original theory of social responsibility.[12] Although designed for the mass media, this theory of what communication should be and do, implied that communicators had an obligation to society to operate demurely.[13] Although impossible to enforce this restraint, it was always understood that if communicators did not confine themselves, constraints would have to be sanctioned by an outside force, probably the government. In short, as the role of public relations becones more important in the United States, public relations counselors may be forced to become licensed, etc., if the practice does not go about its business in a socially responsible manner.

PROFESSIONAL STATUS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Professional status and social responsibility are inseparable. Historical and lexicological definitions of Flexner,[14] Carr-Saunders,[15] Cogan,[16] and others insist that professional criteria include, among other things, altruism with a solid concern for society and a purpose of benefiting

mankind. More recently these measures have recognized the need for a code of ethics, often clarified and interpreted by concrete cases.

Although the purpose here is not to debate whether or not public relations is a profession, these criteria should be discussed because of their close tie with social responsibility.

Professional standards. Gerald's consensus of criteria needed for professional status is often considered when debating if journalism is a profession or not. These guidelines, which can apply to other areas of communication such as public relations, say that full professional status requires the following:[17]

1. A technique acquired by prolonged and specialized training.
2. The rendering of specialized service to the community.
3. Fixed renumeration by fee or salary.
4. A sense of responsibility developed among the practitioners for the technique which they possess.
5. And, manifest concern for competence and honor in the profession as a whole.

Based on these criteria one might say that some of the PRSA accredited counselors have achieved professional status, but most would argue that the majority of America's public relations practitioners fall short on one or more of these requirements.

Education for public relations. The issue of prolonged and specialized training is a good example of the lack of consensus regarding criteria necessary for professionalism. Even though this is 1976, there are still public relations

practitioners who honestly feel the best education for a public relations career is high school graduation with "professional training on the job." Others advise prospective public relations people to receive university degrees in business or liberal arts areas with no specific communication courses, and certainly no instruction in public relations. Most American public relations counselors now recognize the need for a blend of liberal arts, business, government, economics and journalism or communication courses in a university degree program which includes three courses plus an internship in public relations.[18] Few professionals or educators join Griswold in saying that public relations should be taught in schools or departments of public relations—— the only true way in which "prolonged and specialized training" in public relations could be assured.[19]

Should PR be called something else? Usually public relations has avoided the temptations to exagerate its own importance in seeking public recognition as a profession. Some occupations, perhaps assuming society will overlook their arrogance, use supercilious titles to glorify their skills in the hope of gaining professional recognition. Thus, garbage men become known as sanitation engineers, clerks are junior executives, and salesmen are account executives or financial consultants. A few have suggested changing public relations to some other title. Scott, for example, has suggested the term "certified communication consultants" in hopes of distinguishing the more professional public relations activities from the publicity agent image.[20] Many public relations practitioners

want to keep the term public relations and appear willing to fight off those who use the PR tag for activities PRSA and other such organizations would not consider public relations.[21]

Towards professionalization. A sensible compromise is that public relations is not a profession in the traditional sense, but that it does have some elements of professional status. Vollmer and Mills might say that public relations shows evidence of "professionalization," a term they use to describe the process by which occupations can be observed to change certain characteristics in the direction of becoming recognized as a profession.[22] What's important here is that public relations is a unique vocation where the question of profession or non-profession is best answered in terms of each individual public relations practitioner and not in terms of the entire practice. Just as there are honest, dedicated, ethical medical doctors there are professional public relations counselors. However, just as there are physicians in business only to make money, with little or no concern for society, there are, unfortunately, people practicing public relations today in a most unprofessional manner.

METHODOLOGY

Critics of public relations research often question the validity of survey research which amasses many individual responses to a small number of questions. Yet while judging the merits of large random sampling with mail questionnaires, etc., these reviewers usually do not understand that time and financial restrictions to scholarly research often rule out

use of nondirective interviews on a large-scale basis. In the case at hand it was decided to use a small number of subjects and to question each one at great length. Care was taken to select a purposive sample (n=22) which, although not a probability prototype, guaranteed representation from most types of job areas, age-levels, city sizes and other such variables.

Methodology consisted of communicator analysis with a series of intensive and detailed, yet informal, nondirective conversational interviews designed to allow for free exploration of unknown variables and, hopefully, the emergence of new insights. Many anthropologists and some sociologists insist that the informal conversational interview permits greater depth of inquiry and response than does an interview in which the same questions are always asked in the same way for each respondent.[23]

The interviewer's function in this type of research is simply to encourage the respondent to talk about a given topic with a minimum of direct questioning or guidance.[24] As Selltiz, et al., explain it, "Perhaps the most typical remarks made by the interviewer in a nondirective interview are: 'You feel that . . .' or 'Tell me more' or 'Why?' or 'Isn't that interesting?' or, simply, 'Uh huh.'"[25]

Such an approach is not recommended in studies using many hired interviewers, but in this project the author himself conducted all questioning, thus assuring a greater degree of uniformity.

The sample was selected from a population of the more than 200 members of the Texas Public Relations Association. The

author is a member of the TPRA board of directors facilitating the possibility of holding candid interviews and creating a completely permissive and frank atmosphere in which subjects were free to express views without fear of being identified.

Care had to be taken to control bias. The informality of the interviews and the researcher's own biases could yield data which favored the researcher's opinions on the subject.[26] Thus a control mechanism was developed where the month after the interviews were conducted the author discussed this study's results with a small but proportionate sample of the study's subjects, in attempts to determine if anyone disagreed with something he or she might have said during an interview. No such disagreement was discovered.

RESULTS

Four major variables appear prominent when considering social responsibility and public relations. The interviews revealed these as the level of respect public relations receives from management, the degree of supervision of the public relations function, the role played by public relations in decision making, and, in all of its complexity, the level of professional status awarded public relations.

Respect from management. Consensus was that social responsibility in public relations must begin with management. One subject said, "If the company doesn't want to be responsible to society's needs it becomes increasingly difficult for the public relations person to show much social responsibility."

One individual, who worked with a small public relations agency, said firms such as his must decide how honest, truthful and how responsible each communication campaign is to be before any contract for public relations services is signed. This practitioner indicated that any public relations counsel who insists on ". . . full, ideal, total social responsibility," might have difficulty finding work.

Consumer activists and public interest groups are forcing many companies to show more concern for society's interests today than was the case a decade ago. Most public utility public relations people interviewed said over four-fifths of their time is now being spent either on ecological issues or on the problems of justifying utility rate increases. These are areas where social responsibility has become increasingly important. Generally speaking, younger public relations counselors were delighted that management was now insisting on socially responsible public relations activities. Some older practitioners, however, said demands for more social responsibility have presented a threat to the free enterprise system. Their feeling is that America was built on capitalism and that it is wrong to insist that businesses should be responsible to society as a whole.

Management's need for public relations is increasing continually and the majority of those interviewed said this was having a two-fold affect. First, it was creating a greater need for able public relations practitioners capable of solving these many communication problems for management. Second, it was

placing public relations people in a position where they can earn greater respect from management. To quote one subject, ". . . if management has a public relations problem and you solve it effectively, management then holds public relations in higher esteem . . . they respect you more."

Degree of supervision. Subjects were convinced that the amount of supervision the public relations function receives from management has a direct effect on the level of professionalism, thus making it an important concern when considering social responsibility.

Granted management must chart the direction of a public relations campaign, but practitioners interviewed in this study thought the public relations function would show more concern for socially responsible issues if PR counselors were left alone to carry out PR activities without constant supervision from management.

"The problem," to quote one respondent, "is that too many people consider themselves experts in communication and public relations." Many shared the frustration of having superiors who wanted to guide and direct public relations efforts. As another concerned practitioner said, ". . . public relations demands long-term planning, but some managers want to design or change public relations programs on the spur of the moment, and that just can't be done." Essentially, the feeling on this issue seemed to be that public relations practitioners do want to be socially responsible but that management does not unless it is forced into it. For example, several subjects said their

public relations activities have been more socially responsible in recent years only because management was forced either to be more responsible to society's needs or else risk the loss of business.

Although the majority insisted that the degree of supervision factor was an important step towards greater social responsibility, this term was considered the least significant of the four major variables being discussed here.

Decision making. The role of public relations in decision making is increasing, but subjects indicated that public relations counselors are still a long way from having the same role in this judgment process that lawyers have had for many years.

Almost every subject, and especially those practitioners who work for large corporations, insisted that the public relations function should have the same decision making powers the legal function now has. It was said that public relations counselors must communicate to the court of public opinion the same way as the legal attorneys must communicate to the courts of law. Most emphasized that public opinion was, at times, more important than legal opinion. For example, one subject cited former President Richard M. Nixon saying that although Mr. Nixon has been pardoned through the legal system of the United States, many Americans think ". . . he's just a crook. . ." and the jury of public opinion has found him guilty. And some subjects provided examples of actions their employers have taken in recent years to satisfy society on an issue which found them correct in

the eyes the law, but wrong in the eyes of public opinion.

Public relations practitioners, and especially PRSA accredited ones, often operate with socially responsible ideals. If decisions are entrusted to them they feel more assured that the public relations activities will be more responsible to society than if management makes all decisions for the public relations function.

And yet, few of the subjects in this study could honestly say that they played a strong and effective role in decision making. All agreed that public relations should have a part in making corporate decisions, but few were asked to participate.

Level of professional status. Professionalism is an ambiguous term and it's difficult to pin-point exactly what a subject means by "professional status" in an informal interview. But many of those consulted with in this study used words such as "professional," "professionalism," "professionalization," etc., when suggesting ways in which public relations could become more responsible to society.

When it became apparent that professional status was indeed a variable public relations people considered important when viewing public relations activities and social responsibility, it was decided to probe into this area and try to determine exactly what the subjects meant when they spoke about professionalism or professional status.

Consensus was that public relations practitioners are upset that they are not held in higher esteem by management and by the public in general. There was evidence, and it was strong attestation, that public relations people have an inferiority

complex. They're frustrated by the narrow-minded journalist who still thinks public relations only includes publicity work, that public relations counselors are still in the "flack and drummer stage" as one subject called it. They're upset that management hasn't afforded public relations equal status with more traditional professions such as law. They're uneasy because many Americans don't know what public relations is; to quote one subject, ". . . even my best friend doesn't understand what I do for a living."

Many subjects in this study were former journalists and some compared public relations' concern for professional status in the same vein as journalism's perception as a profession. Some argued that journalism was not very professional. Examples of reporters soliciting information from public relations people in confidence, and then using this "off the record" information in news stories were scorned. A few thought that public relations could become more professional than journalism. It was explained that public relations could become licensed, such as law and medicine, and require certain admission standards plus certain performance criteria, perhaps built around the PRSA code of ethics.

Those interviewed seemed to feel that professional status would help public relations. All agreed that public relations has come a long way since the press-agent era at the turn of the century, and most insisted that there was quite a distance to go before public relations could truly be classified as a profession.

And yet, although these subjects thought the practice of public relations should be awarded more professional status,

many objected to suggestions from the interviewer that in order to have more professionalism, public relations must consider professional criteria more than it has in the past. For example, traditional professions such as medicine, theology, law, etc., insist upon certain educational standards and have licensing to enforce codes of ethics. Although some of the public relations practitioners interviewed in the study at hand claim public relations needs more professional status, they objected to suggestions that a required course of study should be completed by prospective PR counselors before public relations could be practiced; and they also took issue with the recommendation that all public relations practitioners should strive for PRSA accreditation status and comply to PRSA codes of ethics, or else face suspension from the right to practice what they want to call "their profession of public relations."

TOWARD A THEORY

There are many communication theories which explain the process of public relations. Most of these, however, are ideas which can be applied to the entire spectrum of the communication procedure. Public relations research is still in a speculative stage and this area of academic study is in urgent need of systematic knowledge founded on a broad base. Without such comprehensiveness, the insights of future public relations research might be limited to specific settings and problems which have been investigated previously.

Developing a theory. The intention of a theory in modern social research is ". . . to summarize existing knowledge,

to provide an explanation for observed events and relationships, and to predict the occurrence of as yet unobserved events and relationships on the basis of the explanatory principles in the theory."[27]

Once theories were considered final explanations, but today their character is more provisional because they are always held with some tentativeness and are invariably open to revision. This, naturally, tends to stimulate future research as scholars attempt to confirm or deny theories via empirical investigation.

Theory of social responsibility in PR. With these considerations and limitations in mind, the following theory has been formed, based essentially on the evidence gathered in this research study:

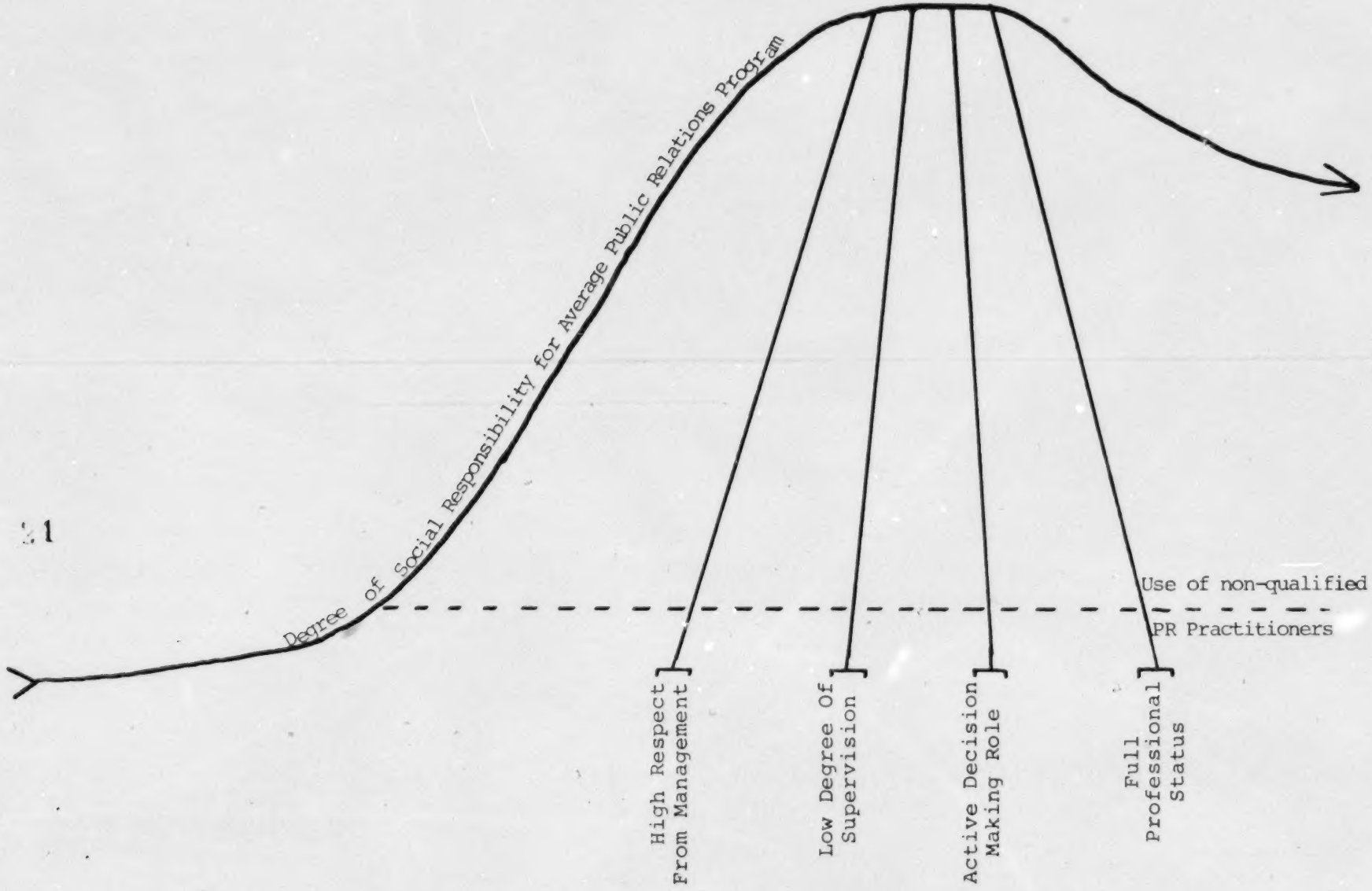
> The level of social responsibility in public relations rises as professionalization takes place and the level of respect from management increases, the degree of supervision from management decreases and as the public relations counselor's role in the decision making process becomes more dominant.

This theory, which is diagramed on Page 19, offers a complex, multi-step approach to understanding those things necessary to insure social responsibility in the practice of public relations.

The theory of social responsibility in public relations is an outgrowth of the assumption that in earlier times the need for public relations activity was created by public demands for socially responsible actions. Historically, we've seen how "the definite beginnings" of American public relations activity, as Cutlip and Center report them, can be traced to the muckraking era of the turn of the century when public relations was turned

TABLE I

PROGRESSION CURVE FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS


Degree of Social Responsibility for Average Public Relations Program
Use of non-qualified PR Practitioners
High Respect From Management
Low Degree Of Supervision
Active Decision Making Role
Full Professional Status

21

22

to for answers to the journalists of exposure, as reporters such as Ida Tarbell and Upton Sinclair were called in those days.[28]

The complexity of today's society, however, has demanded more from public relations, and management must now realize these variables which lead towards true and effective social responsibility in communication campaigns.

The theory assumes that public relations practitioners will be used in the public relations process. Use of non-qualified public relations counselors, such as lawyers, moonlighting journalists, etc., presents a potential threat to effectiveness and to social responsibility.

IN CONCLUSION

All indications denote that Griswold is right when she says that America will turn more and more to public relations for problem solving in the future.[29]

As public relations practitioners continue to move from the "flack and drummer," or publicity-agent status upwards into board of director and vice-presidential roles, their expertise will be called upon more and more.

Since the future probably will see more criticism of American organizations and institutions, and in particular businesses, public relations counselors will have to develop constructive solutions to these upcoming problems and will have to maintain high standards of ethics, performance and professionalism in carrying out their duties.

This theory of social responsibility in public relations asks management to recognize the need for, and to make, certain

concessions to the public relations function. But before public relations practitioners can be assured that America's management will take the actions this theory recommends they follow to insure more social responsibility in public relations, the public relations counselors themselves must be willing to upgrade entrance requirements and to police the practice.

Total social responsibility goes hand-in-hand with true professional status. But true professional status is something which must be earned. And in public relations, both sides must give a little before the much needed increases in socially responsible activities can legitimately be changed from theory to reality.

FOOTNOTES

[1]William E. Hocking, Freedom of The Press: A Framework of Principle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947).

[2]J. Edward Gerald, The Social Responsibility of The Press (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), passim.

[3]Charles R. Wright, Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 3-4.

[4]Milton Rokeach, "Attitude Change and Behavioral Change," Public Opinion Quarterly (30:4; Winter, 1966-67), pp. 529-550.

[5]Public Relations News, (32:8; Feb. 23, 1976), p. 1

[6]Remarks made by Elie Abel to the American Life Insurance Association and Institute of Life Insurance in Chicago, February, 1976, as reported by Public Relations News, loc. cit.

[7]From remarks made by James F. Fox, 1975 President, Public Relations Society of America, at The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, June 16, 1975.

[8]Public Relations News, April 2, 1973, pp. 3-4.

[9]Public Relations News, Feb. 10, 1975, pp. 5-6.

[10]Public Relations News, Oct. 13, 1975, pp. 3-4.

[11]Public Relations News, April 28, 1975, pp. 3-4.

[12]Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, Four Theories of The Press (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), pp. 83-91.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Abraham Flexner, "Is Social Work a Profession?" School and Society, June 26, 1915, p. 904.

[15]A.M. Carr-Saunders and P.A. Wilson, The Professions Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), pp. 284-286.

[16]Morris L. Cogan, "The Problem of Defining a Profession," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, January, 1955, p. 105.

[17]Gerald, op. cit., p. 180.

[18]Commission on Public Relations Education, "A Design For Public Relations Education," Public Relations Review (1:3; Winter, 1975), pp. 56-66.

[19]Denny Griswold, "Recommended Curriculum," Public Relations News (31:38; Sept. 22, 1975), p. 1.

[20]Alan Scott, "Licensing and Professionalism in Public Relations," a speech to the Public Relations Society of America, North Texas Chapter, Dallas, Texas, October 14, 1974.

[21]Remarks made by Brig. Gen. H.J. Dalton, Jr., Director of Information, U.S. Air Force, at the Texas Public Relations Association annual winter meeting, San Antonio, Texas, Feb. 21, 1976.

[22]Howard M. Vollmer and Donald L. Mills, eds., Professionalization (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. vii-viii.

[23]Roy E. Carter, Jr., "Field Methods in Communication Research," in Ralph O. Nafziger and David M. White, eds., Introduction to Mass Communications Research (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), p. 94.

[24]Claire Selltiz, and others, Research Methods in Social Relations (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1959), p. 268.

[25]Ibid. [26]Ibid., pp. 583-584. [27]Ibid., p. 481.

[28]Scott M. Cutlip and Allen H. Center, Effective Public Relations, 4th ed., (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 74.

[29]Denny Griswold, "What is the outlook for public relations in 1976?" Public Relations News (32:6; Feb. 9, 1976), pp. 1-2.

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